



Bauerlein, Mark. Whitman and the American Idiom [review]

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apparent when she uses last names in referring to males and first names in referring to females. For example, in speaking of Paul Ferlazzo's article on Gilchrist, Alcaro writes: "Ferlazzo points out that before 1870—in addition to the reviews by Fanny, Juliette, and Adah—there had been a number of appreciative American criticisms of *Leaves of Grass*" (130).

Also, the book would have benefited from more historical awareness. For example, Alcaro conjectures that Gilchrist "may have been the first woman in the nineteenth-century Anglo-American world to declare . . . that sexuality is a beautiful and natural aspect of being a woman" (24). Not only were there women in the United States who earlier than Gilchrist publicly spoke of the pleasures of sex—the "Adah" [Menken] referred to in the previous paragraph certainly was one—but also there were women before Gilchrist who spoke in Whitman's defense and who used Whitman's representation of sex as a validating argument for his poetry. Likewise, Alcaro's discussion of Fanny Fern does not benefit from the recent critical work done on Fanny Fern and her writing. Alcaro comes close at times to doing to women in general what she says that critics have done to Gilchrist: leave them out of history or, in the case of Fanny Fern, make judgments seemingly without looking carefully at the work which feminist scholars have recently made available. Finally, more connections made between Gilchrist's life and the cultures in which she and Whitman lived would have benefited the reader.

Alcaro's book does, however, put to rest critics' over-simplification of Gilchrist's feelings for Whitman and of their friendship. She provides us with a view of Gilchrist which will correct reductive readings of her such as the one by Edwin Haviland Miller when he suggests that Whitman's frequent visits to the Staffords' farm were made "to escape the importunities of his passionate admirer" (*Corr*, 3:62n). Alcaro's book insists that we give Gilchrist what Whitman so astutely gave her—respect for her as her own person.

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SHERRY CENIZA

MARK BAUERLEIN. *Whitman and the American Idiom*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991. xi + 171 pp.

Has ever a poet had more enemies, real or assigned, than those ascribed to Walt Whitman by himself or by others? Slave owners, politicians, literati, Europeans, conservatives, straights, capitalists—the list goes on and on. As though that list weren't already long enough, now along comes Mark Bauerlein with a new candidate for the list: language itself.

The real drama of *Leaves of Grass*, according to Bauerlein, is all internal. Where dozens of earlier critics have assumed, often after Whitman's own remarks, that the thrust of his poetry is directed toward and against the outside world and have framed their questions and sought their answers accordingly, Bauerlein comes at his answers from a basis in semiotics that leads him to take more literally than anyone before him Whitman's claim that *Leaves of Grass*

was a "language experiment." While for him, as for others, the chief task of a critical study of *Leaves of Grass* is to account for its origins and to explain its poetics, his own account centers specifically on Whitman's ongoing struggle between 1855-1860 to surmount the limits of linguistic representation, a struggle he sees as both anterior and interior to the poetry. More specifically, he sees Whitman as engaged in an attempt to devise a "logocentric poetics" that would transcend the representational, convention-bound nature of language and that would result, ideally, in a nonliterary verse free from artificiality and coextensive with nature. Such a verse (and only such a verse) would serve Whitman's highest poetic ambition of communicating an unmediated exchange of fraternal feeling between democratic brethren.

Bauerlein begins his argument with the claim that Whitman shared the ambition of other Romantics to write an Orphic poetry but that he deviated from the Romantic norm in identifying conventional language and systems of abstract thought ("theory") as the ultimate antagonists of his desired "natural writing": "Through a prodigious insight . . . he sees how theory explores the arbitrary, conventional basis of putatively organic or symbolic language, and how theory undoes immediacy and deixis, organicism and any linguistic motivation" (6). The portrait of the poet sketched by Bauerlein is one of an anxiety-ridden man fixated during his most creative years on this dilemma, whose life's work "began not with an inspiration, but with a menace to inspiration" (160). Over the period of the publication of the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman played out the full cycle of this anxiety, emerging defeated in 1860 and resigned to the impossibility of ever surmounting the representational limitations of language.

Bauerlein makes his argument with considerable sophistication. He structures his book, after an initial theoretical overview of the grounds he will be exploring, around what he sees as the three-part authorial dynamic of "Composition," "Reading," and "Revision" and matches his chapter discussion of each to close readings, respectively, of the 1855, 1856, and 1860 editions of *Leaves of Grass*. In his chapter on the first edition, he focuses on Whitman's bold attempt to devise a non-literary poetics, which sought to unite language with feeling and which in their highest moments substituted non-verbal constructions (such as physiognomic presence and vocalistic performance) for words. Then in the second chapter, he explores the way Whitman attempted to bypass not only convention-bound poetics, as in 1855, but also convention-bound reading and interpretation of his work by others. Finally in the third chapter, he carries his argument through an analysis of Whitman's revisionary accounting of his life and his life's work in the self-declaredly defeatist poems of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*.

The strength of *Whitman and the American Idiom* lies in the originality of its argument and the internal ingenuity of its conceptual terms. Taken in the abstract, it has a compelling logic which powers the book's ability to give new readings of old poems, which curiously it does without questioning the established canon of Whitman's poems. "Song of Myself," for instance, Bauerlein reads as the cornerstone of Whitman's poetics, but not because of its representational character but because of its pervasive self-referentiality. For him, it is to be understood above all as "a poem about writing and composition, about

finding a language adequate to a certain emotional-spiritual import" (55). The central passage of the poem, according to this reading, is Section 25 ("Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sunrise would kill me, / If I could not now and always send sunrise out of me"), which expresses Whitman's highest aspiration of translating nature into art simultaneously with art into nature.

Of the second edition poems, he sees "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" as the most profound figuration of Whitman's "anxiety of misreading," its ferry crossing rendered as "the archetypal reading experience" to be shared between Whitman and his reader. Far as he sees that poem located from the poems of 1855, Bauerlein posits an even greater distance between it and such 1860 poems as "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," which he reads as Whitman's most open declaration of poetic failure made to "You," whom he riskily interprets as the poem's reader. With his despair before the insubstantiality of his own poems in "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" and their utter lack of originality in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," Whitman "relinquishes his grandiose bardic posture and regretfully acknowledges the sign's sovereignty" (15). Seeing these poems as enacting the last act of the central drama of *Leaves of Grass*, Bauerlein chooses to end his analysis with them.

At the same time, I should point out that Bauerlein clearly intends that the relevance of this monograph extend beyond its specific subject. Or, to put this somewhat differently, I should say that the innermost purpose of the author is directed as much at the nature of literary theory as it is at Whitman himself. In fact, Bauerlein sees and uses Whitman as a classic case study of an author's "resistance to theory." So where others have seen Whitman as a forerunner of various aspects of twentieth-century poetry, Bauerlein sees him as a forerunner of late-twentieth-century literary criticism.

Compelling as the logic of the book may be internally, it loses some of its credibility when held up outwardly and fitted to the circumstances of Whitman's life and times. The compressed nature of his argument—it opens in 1855 and closes in 1860—tends to collapse the dynamic he is interpreting to unwarranted dimensions. The book's argument ignores the fact that Whitman was acutely concerned with questions of composition and readership years before he published the 1855 *Leaves*. Even before the first edition, Whitman was mulling over the issue of audience and reader reception, as one can see, for example, in his notes on the careers of Wordsworth and other poets. I personally believe that this interest goes back to his years as a journalist in the early and mid-1840s.

Furthermore, it is not at all clear that the posited two-step sequence of composition and reading actually correlates to the reality of Whitman's poetic development. Already in the first edition, Whitman was exhibiting a heightened awareness of the reader, an awareness which led him immediately after the publication of the 1855 *Leaves* to write a series of reader-directed self-reviews. For this reason, the quick pivot he makes between his readings of the 1855 and 1856 editions seems forced. Not only do I wonder whether a sharp distinction between the 1855 poems as composition-centered and the 1856 as reader-centered can be maintained but I sense Bauerlein's argument virtually admitting so when it interprets the 1855 "A Song for Occupations" as already anticipating the poetic rendering of the reader reading. Then, too, some readers

may question the plausibility or the adequacy of the primitive psychological model of narcissism off of which Bauerlein bases his reading of the poet's poetic intentions and strategies. Is the pursuit of "happiness" a sufficient explanation of Whitman's motives?

Despite my hesitations about *Whitman and the American Idiom*, I find the book an important addition to Whitman scholarship. Like Michael Moon's *Disseminating Whitman*, it shakes old scholarly structures and offers a competing model of intellectual inquiry, one which exposes Whitman to new angles of vision and challenges all researchers working in the field to examine their premises and review their conclusions. As such, it both testifies and contributes to the renewed vitality in Whitman scholarship.

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